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Let's CH@T about Vodka

Staff photos by
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Food

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Daniel Brennan, who was raised in Delran, produces his own brand of wines, Decibel, in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand.

A college student finds a recipe for success by combining fine spirits and social media.

By PEG QUANN
STAFF WRITER

Melissa Sohmer could drink a toast to homework. Homework? Yes, since hers has turned into a business for the young entrepreneur.

When the Holland, Pa., resident was given the assignment in her graphic design class at Bucks County Community College two years ago to design a label and advertising materials for a beverage, Sohmer thought, "What's new? What will stand out? I was thinking how we all text — social media is taking over the world. We use acronyms to communicate and that rung a bell in my mind."

Using her creative juices, she came up with the name "Ch@t."

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"The whole brand is centered on the new generation of communication," she said. Vodka would be the perfect beverage to apply it to, Sohmer, 21, surmised, since it's a drink of choice for young adults.

When her classmates praised her project, Melissa asked her dad for advice on how to turn the concept into an actual product.

"I was getting positive feedback that it was a really good idea. I could see it on a shelf," she said.

Her father, Rick Sohmer, thought her idea had merit, and he had a means to help her make the most of it.

"My dad helped me make the prototype," Sohmer said. The father-daughter team did some more research, talked to some experts and found a distiller in South Carolina who could produce a new vodka in different flavors, including strawberry.

"I'm very proud (of her)," Rick Sohmer said. "She did a really good job. I'm surprised she got this far."

Her mother, Sue, is really proud of her too, she added.

Rick Sohmer's brother, Scott, who lives in Levittown, Pa., and works shifts as a power plant supervisor, is helping them market Ch@t on his days off. He makes most of the sales calls.

Ch@t vodka has a suggested retail price of \$28. Melissa describes it as "an ultra premium vodka."

She's using the first letter of common texting acronyms to differentiate flavors of the brand.

So far, it's offered in both plain "P2P — person to person," and strawberry flavors, with the strawberry one being in a red-labeled bottle and having the acronym smh — for "shaking my head" — on the back.

Melissa said the strawberry Ch@T is the same 80 proof as the unflavored, unlike some other vodkas that reduce the alcohol content in their flavored varieties.

Nina Sygnecki, a wine expert at Traino's Wine & Spirits in Evesham, called Ch@t "wonderful. The strawberry is really inspirational for cocktails," she said.

The Sohmers are researching the introduction of other flavors. Melissa plans to use texting acronyms to identify them as well.

Since December, Ch@t has been stocked by 10 wine and spirit shops in New Jersey, including Traino's locations in Evesham and Voorhees and Oliver's in Burlington City.

It can be obtained by special order from the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, Rick Sohmer said. It also is available at Marie's Cozy Corner in Fairless Hills, Pa., and the Sohmers hope to get it in other restaurants.

At a tasting at Traino's in Evesham, the Sohmers sold 30 bottles.

"The first tasting was fantastic.

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A close-up of "CH@T" brand vodka on sale at Traino's Wine & Spirits in Evesham.

'flying wine making' from New Zealand

By PEG QUANN
STAFF WRITER

Delran native son Daniel Brennan, now an international winemaker, will bring his own brand of New Zealand wines to a Riverside restaurant Monday before heading to Italy and then back to the summer warmth of the South Pacific.

Brennan, 36, will lead a wine tasting event at The Madison which will pair the wines with four-course gourmet tasting plates prepared by the restaurant's executive chef Jack Connor.

Brennan combined his interest in wine and music to produce his own Decibel wines. He will bring a variety of them to the tasting.

A world traveler, he grew up learning about wine from his Sicilian grandfather who made both wine and the barrels in which to ferment them. His family operated McCrossen's Tavern, a restaurant in the Art Museum area of Philadelphia where Brennan further developed his interest in wines.

He attended Holy Cross High School in Delran, before heading to Catholic University in Washington, where he earned a degree in world politics and philosophy and later worked as a stagiaire, or intern, in the European Union Parliament.

Brennan developed a love for New Zealand wines while working at his family's restaurant.

"The wines were "always vibrant and unique, but also tough to find, which meant there wasn't that many of them, he said.

He studied winemaking at The Wine School of Philadelphia and later was accepted at the Eastern Institute of Technology in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, where he further studied the country's wines.

In 2009, he decided to settle there and now works at the Unison Vineyard in Hawke's Bay where he bottles the Decibel wines. "The owners at Unison were kind enough to let me experiment with my own wines, sourcing fruit from some of the surrounding vineyards," he said, adding that Hawke's Bay "has a gorgeous maritime climate and strong sunlight hours" that make it "one of the best places on Earth to grow wine."

In New Zealand's off season, "I come up to California and work for wineries there, helping out. It's called 'flying wine-making,'" he said.

His sister and brother help him market the wines locally.

Brennan said he has sold a couple of thousand cases of wine. "We're trying to build it up slowly," he said.

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Melissa Sohmer with her father Rick Sohmer (left) and her uncle, Scott Sohmer at Traino's Wine & Spirits in Evesham. The family is now in the vodka business as a result of a college course.



Sohmer, a former graphic design student at Bucks County Community College, holds a bottle of her CH@T brand strawberry vodka.

She has a very bright future," said Adam West, a Traino's manager.

The Sohmers are pleasantly surprised at their success so far. They hope to build a following.

Melissa, who's now a senior majoring in graphic

design at West Chester University, was thrilled hearing people say it was really good. "Once they try it, they'll taste the difference."

"I had no idea and no intention of breaking into this. It's all new for all of us," her dad added.